



# Getting WEST POINT Back on Mission

General William R. Richardson, U.S. Army, Retired

**I**N 2005, as the new academic year began at the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, New York, Superintendent Lieutenant General Bill Lennox announced an updated mission statement. The new statement deletes the phrase “a lifetime of selfless service to the Nation” and returns the Academy to its primary role of preparing cadets “for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation *as an officer in the United States Army.*” Thousands of Academy graduates have long sought this change. They realized that a change made to the mission statement in 1987 had a most damaging effect on the retention of Academy graduates in the Army.

From 1970 to the present, two momentous events occurred that bore heavily on retention: The Vietnam War and the end to the Cold War. Each event precipitated a reduction in force (RIF). Many RIFs had occurred over the 20 years, but for the first time, the Army conducted a RIF of career officers—USMA graduates and Distinguished Military Graduates of the Reserve Officer Training Corps and the Officer Candidate School. These officers had chosen Army careers and were serving ably and honorably.

## Serving the Nation

In 1987, USMA Superintendent Lieutenant General Dave R. Palmer and a small committee advising him on the mission statement saw the devastating effect RIFs had on graduates’ self-esteem. The superintendent concluded that adding the phrase “and a lifetime of selfless service to the Nation” might assuage RIF’d graduates’ self-esteem by acknowledging that they could continue serving the Nation in ways other than being in the Army. The phrase spawned an unexpected and unintended

interpretation: Any kind of service to the Nation after graduation was just as acceptable as an Army career.

The phrase became, literally, an escape clause for those wanting to go to the Academy, get a fine free education, serve the minimum active duty service obligation of 5 years, and then leave the Army. Countless cadets and junior officers felt it was perfectly acceptable to perform selfless service to the Nation on Wall Street or on Main Street rather than in the Army, and they were encouraged by industry recruiting to do so. During the 30 years from 1970 through 1999, the Academy commissioned 28,000 lieutenants, 18,000 of whom have left or will leave the Army before reaching 15 years of active service.

## Serving the Nation as Army Officers

The new mission statement, which compels graduates to serve the Nation as career officers in the Army, is of landmark importance. It impinges on the serious problem of retaining Academy graduates on active duty.

Current unsatisfactory retention rates threaten the Academy’s cost-effectiveness and, conceivably, its very existence. The seriousness of this retention problem is best illustrated by the loss of officers from the classes of 1985 to 1989 who are now reaching 15 years of active duty since graduation. They have, on average, lost 71 percent of their members, leaving about 29 percent to compete for and participate in the vitally important leadership ranks of colonel and general.

Because the Academy’s mission statement has an important influence on retention, reorienting it on the Army’s need for career officers is a major step forward. Now, everything the Academy does

can be tested against the new mission statement and brought into alignment with it, especially in the recruitment of cadets. Cadets now understand clearly that they are expected to serve the Nation as officers in the U.S. Army, and they must make a considered decision that they desire an Army career. The recruiting goal must be that of identifying and attracting candidates who have thought long and hard about their options and made a conscious decision that they want an Army career.

## Why We Serve

Recently, cadets were questioned as to why they chose to enter the Academy. Their answers reveal that the Academy had been recruiting some of the wrong people. One recruiting representative from the Academy's admissions office acknowledged during a briefing that only 19 to 38 percent of incoming cadets give "desire to be a career Army officer" as their main reason for attending the Academy. This means that somewhere between 81 and 62 percent are attending for some other reason. Given this information, the Academy can formulate a more effective recruiting program. To begin, the recruiting message must be hard-edged, crystal-clear, uniformly understood, and convey that West Point is a military academy whose one and only task is to provide top-quality, career-serving officers to the U.S. Army.

The military academy is part of the Army. When you go there, you are in the Army. If you are not there seeking an Army career, you should go elsewhere. You will not fit in at the Academy if you are otherwise motivated. Moreover, you are denying a space to someone who desires an Army career, and you are endangering USMA's cost-effectiveness. Some say that such an unequivocal message will turn applicants away or toward other academies. So be it. Better that they go elsewhere than consume a first-rate education and then leave before contributing significantly to the quality of the Army's officer corps.



GEN Peter Pace answers questions from cadets at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, 27 April 2005. Pace visited West Point to share advice with the Academy's law department about the lessons he learned while in combat.

## Getting Back on Track

That the Military Academy and Army officials have recently begun to take steps toward solving the retention problem is encouraging. Choice of branch, choice of post, and the opportunity for graduate schooling are being offered to some graduates as incentives in exchange for extending their 5-year obligation. These options might help. Time will tell.

The most important aspect of recruiting and retaining the West Pointer, however, is the staff and faculty's renewed focus on the Academy's real mission: producing standard-setting, career-serving commissioned officers for the U.S. Army. With cadets who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, with officers on the staff and faculty who participated in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, and with the aura that now surrounds West Point as an Army institution preparing its charges for war, one can sense this renewed focus is taking hold. **MR**

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